

The Social Roots of Political Decision-Making

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Individuals make decisions in relation to those around them – what to buy, what to eat, and even how to vote. Understanding the social component of those decisions is confounded by the reality that individuals surround themselves with individuals like themselves along racial, social class, and even partisan lines. Individual's social networks can either lead toward increased understanding and tolerance of others views or reinforcement in those networks can lead them to become further entrenched in their views. Thus, while formal and informal social groups represent a necessary component of democracy, they also present opportunities for political division. Understanding the process and implications of how individuals make political decisions in relation to their social context is imperative toward understanding and engaging the current political climate.

This research sheds new light on social explanations of the vote decision and political activity beyond voting by accounting for the reasons individuals select into groups and how the group then affects their political decisions. It theorizes that selection into a social environment conditions the influence that occurs there. For example, individuals in political groups are more likely to be influenced by that group because political norms are clear and the pressure to comply with those norms is high. In other words, the mechanisms of social influence depend on the selection process. Once selection is accounted for, the influence of the group on the individual can be better ascertained.

This study utilizes a mixed-method approach to illuminate the relationship between individual political attitudes and social networks. First, we employ a three-wave panel study of individuals in organizational groups with varying amounts of political purpose. While we can depict the change in political beliefs as a result of social ties with longitudinal data, we also employ experimental analysis to illuminate mechanism(s) of the influence process. Specifically, we test whether social learning (information), group dynamics (social pressure), and the size and structure of the network itself are mechanisms through which the social environment affects political beliefs. Finally, we follow individuals before, during, and after their selection into groups in order to shed light on how political predispositions influence an individual's selection into a social environment and how that environment then influences their political beliefs.

This project makes both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of social influence, network analysis, and political decision-making by proposing a research design that overcomes common limitations of social influence studies. Recent scholarship ignores the selection process in their attempts to understand influence and little attention has been given to understanding exactly *how* social influence on politics occurs. By holding the reasons for selection into a social group constant, I begin to illuminate the mechanisms through which individuals influence others in politically consequential ways using novel cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental data. Taken together, these efforts focus on the *entire* influence process – from the selection into influence groups to the opportunities for influence in those settings – and promise to significantly advance our understanding of how social networks influence political beliefs.